

AN ANTHOLOGY OF MASQUERADE MASKS AS ARTIFACTS, SOCIOFACTS AND MENTIFACTS

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Abstract

Artifacts, Sociofacts and Mentifacts are a sociological framework which presents three interrelated aspects of culture. Artifacts referring to what people make, Sociofacts; how people come together and for what purpose and Mentifacts; what people think or believe. These dimensions are inseparable and are always present in understanding a given culture. The framework therefore, gives insight into the significance and social uses of masquerade masks. Masquerade masks ideation is a construct of a given culture, which displays the art, entertainment and beliefs of the people. These outcomes are always present in deepening our understanding of a given culture. This article is an attempt in analyzing how the Eyo, Ekpe, Egungun, Gbon, and Chi Wara masquerades fit as Artifacts, Mentifacts and Sociofacts. This paper concludes that Sociofacts represents entertainment, Mentifacts, the beliefs accorded the masquerades by the people which remain a binding force that brings people within a community together to celebrate and felicitate with one another and Artifacts, a creation of an artist or an African craftsman with an intended purpose or function.

Keywords: Masquerade Masks, Sociofacts, Mentifacts and Artifacts

Introduction

Before the advent of Christianity and Islam majority of Africans were followers of their traditional religion. Stemming from this most masquerade masks were made for traditional religious practices, ceremonial reasons and festivals. With the belief by Africans in life after death; where spirits of the deceased relatives or ancestors influenced the living world. This influence were held equally over the weather, crops, livestock, wildlife, entire communities and the gods that must be appeased; where communities held rituals to intercede with the spirit world to turn away ill fortune to motivate good fortune. Amongst the forms of ritual and religious art in these communities are masks worn during masquerade festivals associated with specific rituals, religious ceremonies, weddings and funerals.

Masquerade Masks as Artifacts

The word ‘Artifact’ is derived from two Latin words ‘*arte*’ meaning Art, and ‘*Factum*’ denoting to make. An artifact therefore can be defined as an object that has been deliberately made for a certain intention or aspiration. The definition that supports this article in a more restricted sense refers to simply; hand - made objects which represent a particular culture. When used in a generic sense connotes objects and phenomena that are of interest to archeologists as sources of information about past cultures. In philosophical discussions artifacts are often described as having “intended proper functions: despite their classifications (either on the basis of form, method of production, materials used, style and intended use (Hilpinen 2016). Masquerade masks being a product of an African craftsman or artist (author) can be said

to qualify as an artifact because they meet the criteria suggested by Aristotle in Hilpinen, 2016, who stipulates that an artifact should have an author and should be intentionally made or produced for a purpose. Various styles of these masks produced for religious or ritual reasons by a craftsman is a testament to the diversity and complexity of the ethnic groups that make up the continent.

Masquerade masks in Africa take many forms and offer us enormous insights into the cultures and ethnic communities from whence they came. They are most often emblematic, representative, stylized and abstracted. They are customarily depicted in human, animal or legendary forms which exhibit good balance, craftsmanship, attention to detail and finish.

In Africa due to the enormous rainforests wood inevitably became the natural material for carving masks which irretrievably suffered decay due to lack of adequate storage facility (ies) hence most of them were lost to termites or ants, or rotted to damp. A carver had clear and practical purpose for his art work. He may set out to carve a figure to represent an ancestor or a mask to be used by a priest or diviner just for a year. Whatever the reason intended the author displayed the power of his imagination as startling imbalance is restored to balance by the force of strong design and distortions as the representation of the human or animal forms are not inevitably proportional. He rather strives to stress or overstate specific bodily characteristics, which are often used as a form of conversation or communication between the people, supernatural forces and beings.

The numerous masquerade masks produced were more than facial or head coverings. They often include elaborate costume with adornments and headdress. It should be noted that the process that gives realization to these masquerade masks are often ritualized comprising a prescribed series of steps that were learnt through years of apprenticeship. The carver chooses his wood carefully settling for a green moist wood with the right physical and spiritual qualities which ascertained through divination ritual and offering (s). At the end of their creation these masks are given a life force by a community priest(s) or religious practitioner(s) who relates with the spirit world of the ancestors and gods.

Masquerades as Sociofacts



Plate I: Eyo Masquerade

Source: www.werunthings.com (2009) retrieved on November 18, 2012

The Eyo masquerades appearance because of its white flowing gown will elicit some mixed feelings from an onlooker seeing it for the first time. The wide brimmed fedora hat is in five different colours representing each of the five clans that participate in the masquerade festival. During the festival all the five clans also carry a long wooden plank measuring about six feet long perhaps used to ward off evil. The wooden plank is called Opa'n Bata and has inscriptions on each. The hats have motifs distinguishing each of the clan from the other apart from the different colours of the hats.

Eyo Festival is unique to Lagos State. The masquerade is perhaps the most popular social masquerade in Lagos. It was brought into Lagos in 1750 by Ejilu and Malaki the two male cousins to Olori Olugbani, the wife of Oba Ado and mother of Erelu Kuti 1 of Lagos (Olushola, 2009). On Eyo Day, the main highway in the heart of the city (from the end of Carter Bridge to Tinubu Square) is closed to traffic, allowing for a procession from Idumota to Iga Idunganran (Festivals in Nigeria, 2012). Here, the participants all pay homage to the Oba of Lagos. The Eyo festival takes place whenever occasions and tradition demand, but it is usually held as the final burial rites for a highly regarded chief.

Among the Yoruba, according to (Festivals in Nigeria, 2012), the indigenous religions have largely given way to Christianity and Islam, but the old festivals are still observed. The traditional leaders of the Yoruba are the Oba, who live in palaces and used to govern along with a council of ministers. The Oba's position is now mainly honorary and their chief role is during the observance of the festivals. Yoruba festivals honour their pantheon of gods and mark the installation of a new Oba. The Engungun festival, which honours the ancestors, lasts twenty four days. Each day, a different Engungun in the form of a masked dancer, dances through the town, possessed by one of the ancestors. On the last day, a priest goes to the shrine of the ancestors and sacrifices animals, pouring the blood on the shrine. The sacrifices are collected, and they become the food for the feast that follows.



Plate II: Ekpe Masquerade (2005) Source: Akhenaten in Oluwaseun Osewa (2012), *Ekpe Masquerades - Culture – Nairaland Forum*

The *Ekpe* masquerades shown in Plate II wear some ball-like masks with doughnut-like ring stretching from their neck down to their shoulders. Their wrists and ankles are covered by small rings of puffy materials made of wool. The colours that are common with this woolen rings are yellow, red, green, orange with black. In some cases the closely knit colours of yellow and red give an appearance of geometric shapes while their facial parts are marked with white rings and black dots at the center to depict their eyes.

Effeffiong (2012) in her response discloses that the decorations on the body (*Esik*) of the *Ekpe* masquerade are divided into different parts. These include the forehead, head, waist, the right and left hands. The raffia (*Nyaya*) she discloses is used to adorn different parts of the body which include the hands, chest and legs. She reveals that the decoration used to adorn the fore-head is called the *Ituen* which symbolizes the level or status of a member within the *Ekpe* cult group. By the side of the waist (*Mboboh*) is adorned the big bell (*Nkarika*) which introduces the arrival of the masquerade to the audience. On the right hand (*Esang*) of the masquerade is usually a staff that symbolizes authority and royalty while on the left hand (*Oboti*) the masquerade holds a bunch of leafs symbolizing the agrarian nature of the community or sacredness.

Yetunde (2009) observes that masquerade celebrations are important occasions which are very popular among *Efik* people in Cross River State. There are different types of masquerades for various events like the coronation of the *Obong* (King of Calabar), burial, chieftaincy title ceremonies as well as other seasonal celebrations. The most distinguished and highest of all the masquerades is the *Ekpe* masquerade, according to the author.

Masquerades as Mentifacts



Plate III: *Egungun* masquerade

Source: Images for images of *Egungun* masquerade (2008) Retrieved on October 1, 2012

The word *Egungun* or *Eegun* in Yoruba language means masquerade. The one shown in Plate XI is flamboyantly dressed in colours of, yellow, red, green and blue with white. In giving insight into the significance of the costume and nature of the masquerade, Omosule (2011), reveals that the apparel worn by the masquerades and followers provide visual aesthetics. The costume ensemble consists of colourful strips of fabrics and pieces of leather of different designs and colours. The masquerade wears a headdress which is a wide strip of thick fabric that spreads across its head and a large gown like dress that spreads open when it does its twisting dance moves. The fabrics are adorned with geometric shapes of half drop repeat design patterns in some cases while on the other parts of the fabric the simple repeat pattern is made using two colours of green and yellow.

Egungun ritual was established to appease the anger of a neglected dead father of the Ologbin lineage. (Kunle, 2006). The deceased's corpse had been simply abandoned on an ant hill. Among the Oyo-Yoruba (who trace their political power back to Shango), the Elder *Egungun* masquerade is always *Egungun Oya*-the goddess in the form of cloth-segments. Kunle (2006) states that *Egungun* is the return of the ancestor in masquerade form among the Yoruba. It is a presentational religious art which imagines the collective spirits of the ancestors, and builds them out of overlapping or stitched segments of cloth.

At times of the commemoration of the yearly death festivals and successive funeral rites, these remarkable assemblages "come out" to dance, to astound the viewer, correct if need be, and offer blessings from the spiritual world they normally inhabit. Kunle asserts that, *Egungun* developed as an institution patently to strengthen and consolidate the kingship, the foundering (collapsing) state and its people by theatrically evoking ancestral sanctions, and by lending supernatural authority to the suppression of disloyal, even dissident voices. The use of masquerades as political whips and purgatives (which is often the case and the

interesting part during the festivities) of ill-intentioned elements within communities, was “borrowed from heads-of-family defecting from the Nupe enemy or from Nupeised Yoruba living along the Niger River”. The ancestral dimension stemmed from Oyo-Yoruba tradition itself in the transcendent person of Shango, a legendary early king of Oyo, divinized as Orisha (Kunle, 2006). The author notes that, the concealment of the masker from head to toe connotes elegance, beauty and good packaging as the secrets of good living. He further reveals that, the masquerades are of various types, which include, *Awodegbo*, *Alapansanpa*, *Adiro*, *Alekewogbe*, *Banjo*, *Ajetumobi* and *Ageku-Ejo*. The *Awodegbo*, for example, is adorned in very long red coloured attire decorated with cowries and beautiful items, while the costume worn by *Alapansanpa*, *Adiro* and *Alekewogbe* are very long akin to the Eyo masquerade costume which reveals beauty in royalty. The third category, the *Egungun Banjo*, *Ajetumobi*, *Ageku-Ejo* and others, according to the author, have their “gberi-ode” or “aso-ode” (hunters cloth or costume), made from animal skin bedecked with charms of different colours and designs. The fourth category, *Egun Eleru* and *Gbebolaja*, carry atop, a life chicken, animal heads, pigeon and palm oil to give colour to their appearance. This, the author states, signifies beauty and availability of agricultural gifts that should maintain and sustain good character. While the axe (*aake*) used by the masquerade is to part the way for the people and facilitate easy passage into the world beyond, the use of the whip by the followers on themselves, demonstrates courage, endurance, perseverance and camaraderie, which are virtues of good character. In transmitting and sustaining this masquerade tradition, though controlled by adult associations, children are given space at the edges of events to experiment with their home-made masks and costumes. Masquerade performance such as *Gelede* or *Egungun* is often organized so that children can perform first. Some families even purchase or make elaborate costuming for their children in a similar style to that worn by the adults (Stokstad, 2009).

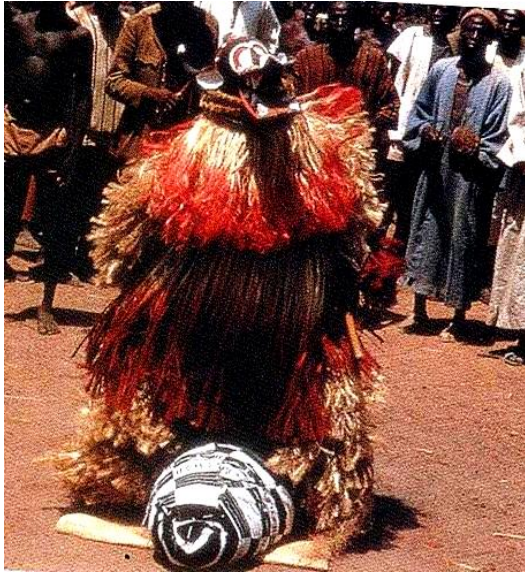


Plate IV:Gbon and other maskers performing at a Senufo funeral, Poro Dikodougou District, 1970. Source: Visona, Poynor and Cole 2008 p.149

The senufo funeral masquerade wears a raffia scarf like a cape that covers its shoulder from its head down to the elbow. The oblong shaped mask has two horns carved from the forehead curving up to a center nearly touching each other at the top. The eyes are a slit suggestive of eyes that are closed in death to perhaps capture the significance and function of its presence at funerals. The lower part of its regalia is made of raffia that reaches down to its ankle. It is vital to note that the overall appearance of this funeral masquerade might remind many of their ultimate end (death). Laying down on an improvised mat in between the legs of the masquerade spread apart is another masquerade that sports a black and white headdress which perhaps suggests supremacy.

The Gbon masquerade shown in Plate IV swishes his raffia skirt over the wrapped body of the deceased three times to recall the three stages of Poro that the man went through before becoming an elder, but of course, the transition and transformation here is to the revered ancestor, effected by the ritual (Visona, Poynor and Cole, 2008).

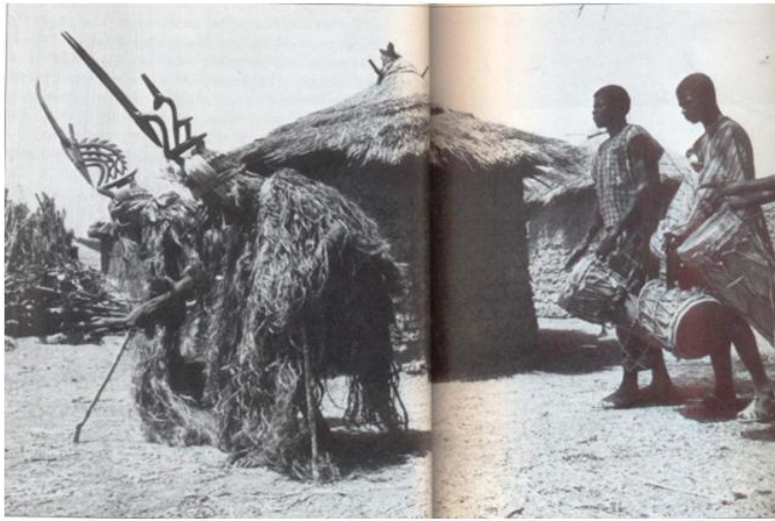


Plate V: Chi Wara Masquerade of the Bamana, in Segou region of Mali
Source: Seiber and Walter (2000)

The Chi Wara masquerade is inspired by the antelope spirit of the Bamana people of Mali. It is a headdress of slender carved masks. There is a male and a female type headdress. The male headdress has a frontal head that stretches up into the horn. The neck is a carving of four rows of wooden curvature that forms the neck. The female headdress as depicted has two figures on it. The figure in front only shows the head that stretches up into the horn and a short neck of one wooden carved row. Behind it is a depiction of perhaps the female antelope's kid depicted in full figure in a stylized manner. The two headdresses are worn by two performers to indicate perhaps the participation of the whole family in the concept of productivity, growth or fertility.

The Chi Wara is the fifth of the six graduated initiation associations of the Bamana. Membership is open to women as well as men, however, participation in certain initiation rites is restricted to circumcised males (Zahan, 1974 in Seiber and Walter, 2000) . The association teaches its members all aspects of food production, the success of which requires cooperation between men and women. Paired male and female headdresses as in Plate II shown above, appear in the Chi Wara performance. The headdresses express many levels of meaning. For example, the carved animals on the headdresses are composites of different species of antelopes. To the Bamana, these forest animals, with their grace and strength, embody the ideal qualities of champion farmers. The male is the sun, and the female is the earth; the fawn on the female's back symbolizes human beings. The fiber costumes worn with these headdresses represent water. As there must be a union of sun, earth, and the water for plants to grow, there must be cooperation between men and women possessing the requisite physical and moral qualities to ensure that agricultural processes-including clearing the land, tilling the soil, planting the seeds, and tending the plants-take place on schedule to ensure a successful harvest (Seiber and Walter, 2000).

Conclusion

Masquerade masks analysed gives insight into the belief systems, entertainment and artifacts of some African communities. It further brought to bear aspects of their religion, good harvests, good afterlife, policing, morals and norms. This paper concludes that Sociofacts represents entertainment, Mentifacts, the beliefs accorded the masquerades by the people which remain a binding force that brings people within a community together to celebrate and felicitate with one another and Artifact, the masquerade mask produced by an artist or craftsman for the purpose of celebrating communal cleansing, coronation ceremonies, chieftaincy installation or masquerade festivals.

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Interviewed Person

Miss Effeffiong Effiong Etim, the Proprietor Mma Effiom Entertainment Group of Cross River State.Interviewed at the Eagle Square, Abuja on the 24th of November, 2012.

Definition of Terms

aake: Yoruba term for ‘axe’

ayei: Efik- Nigeria term for waist dress.

Awodegbo, Alapansanpa, Adiro, Alekewogbe, Banjo, Ajetumobi and *Ageku-Ejo*: Various types of *egungun* masquerade.

Esang : Efik-Nigeria term for the right hand

Ituen : Efik-Nigeria term for the head

Mboboh : Efik-Nigeria term for the waist

Nkarika: Efik-Nigeria term for the big bell

Nyaya: Efik-Nigeria term for the Raffia

Obong : King of Calabar

Oboti: Efik-Nigeria term for the left hand